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SADDAM HUSSEIN'S DECISION TO INVADE KUWAIT WHERE WAS PLAN B?

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## **SADDAM HUSSEIN'S DECISION TO INVADE KUWAIT: WHERE WAS PLAN B?**

### Introduction

Two objectives characterize Saddam Hussein's statecraft: his personal survival as Iraq's leader and his desire to assert Iraqi influence in the Middle East. Both of these objectives figured in his decision to invade Kuwait in August 1990. Surveying the damage to the Iraqi economy following the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam knew that insufficient resources would force him to shelve any domestic program of reconstruction and development, with possible adverse consequences for his ability to maintain authority over the disparate elements of the Iraqi population. Saddam knew also that economic constraints could also undermine his ambitions of maintaining and improving Iraq's position as a regional military power. Kuwait was viewed as a solution to both Iraq's economic needs and a strategic weakness, i.e. the vulnerability of the Shatt al-Arab and the need for an assured, independent avenue for Iraqi oil exports.

In deciding to invade Kuwait, Saddam evaluated his options against a matrix of existing regional power arrangements and his assessment of Kuwait's ability to call upon others for support. Based on this limited framework, Kuwait appeared to be an easy mark. Saddam's mistake was in not understanding the extent to which the international community would assess his action as not just a threat to a Gulf emirate, but as a threat broader international economic interests, requiring a unified international response. Saddam's analysis of potential international reaction was faulty, but his more critical error was in not having available a plan that would have permitted him to stand down from the threat of invasion while giving the appearance of a "win" to the Iraqi population.

### Saddam and the Iraqi nation-state L'etat est moi

In Saddam's mind, and the minds of many Iraqi Sunnis, Saddam is the glue that holds Iraq together. Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh cite Saddam's "paranoiac obsession with personal and political survival" in suggesting that all of Saddam's domestic and political objectives are subordinated to this reality.<sup>1</sup> Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait and his implementation of that decision illustrate how Saddam's focus on maintaining strength at home helps dictate his actions within the region and internationally.

Saddam's holds together a diverse Iraqi population capable of the kind of factionalization that could break up Iraq as a country. An Iraqi nationalist, Saddam understands Iraq's fragility as a nation state and the natural fissures in a population that includes three primary divisions: Sunni Muslims, who dominate the government, but who are a minority within the country; the majority Arab Shi'a, who are located primarily in Iraq's southern governorates; and the fractious Kurds of northern Iraq. Throughout his rule, Saddam variously has used tactics of intimidation, fear and co-optation to gain the cooperation, if not total loyalty, of the different elements of the Iraqi population. A key to Saddam's domestic statecraft has been his exploitation of Sunni fears regarding non-Sunni Iraqis, particularly the Shi'a. The Sunnis that form Saddam's main power base fear losing position to the more numerous Shi'a. Sunnis also see Kurdish separatist ambitions as a threat to Iraq as a state. Despite Saddam's ruthlessness, he is viewed by most Sunnis as their bulwark defending the Iraqi state and the Sunnis' privileged position within that state.

Intimidation is not Saddam's sole approach in forging a more unified Iraq, however. Presiding over a centralized, socialized form of government, Saddam has extended

economic benefits to all of Iraq's governorates. Saddam is a ruthless authoritarian, but it has also been said he is a "modernizing bureaucrat trying to solidify and develop a relatively new nation-state"<sup>2</sup>. By also giving Shia and Kurds a stake in the Iraqi enterprise, he ensured they had something tangible to lose by following a leader other than Saddam.

As he sought to alternately bludgeon and buy off potential Sunni rivals and trouble makers among non-Sunni elements, Saddam has maintained a wary eye on governments, such as Syria and Iran, that might seek to exploit Iraq's underlying divisions. In countering this prospect, Saddam worked to increase Iraq's military power and to establish himself as a regional leader. Saddam's domestic development agenda and regional ambitions are expensive propositions, however. Saddam's national economic strategy, his investment in security organizations at home and the development of a significant military force require an assured flow of Iraq's oil-based revenues--a prospect that was threatened when Saddam confronted Kuwait in 1990.

#### Seeds of the invasion 1980-1989

The events of 1980 led to actions that ultimately resulted in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait a decade later. In February 1980, in reaction to the Camp David accord, Saddam hosted an Arab summit in Baghdad. The Arab charter that was a product of that summit contained principles intended to demonstrate Arab (less Egypt) unity of purpose. Those principles were: 1) No foreign bases on Arab soil, 2) No use of force in Arab-Arab dispute, 3) Arab solidarity in the face of foreign aggression<sup>3</sup>. The charter served Saddam in having the rich, but militarily weak, Gulf states essentially link themselves to him for protection. The Arab Charter principles were regularly reiterated by Arab leaders, mostly in reference

to Israel. The Charter and related statements certainly would give no hint to Saddam that neighboring Saudi Arabia would in the future permit itself to be used as a base for predominantly western troop operations against Iraq. But that prospect was inconceivable in 1980 when an immediate security concern for most Arabs was the potential threat resulting from the fundamentalist revolution in Iran.

In 1980 Saddam had assumed that the war he initiated against his chaotic Persian neighbor would be brief and decisive. Instead, the eight year Iran-Iraq war was an economic and military disaster. The Iran-Iraq war had resulted in financial weakness, a military stalemate, 500,000 deaths and Iraq's population of 18 million continued to support a million man-army.<sup>4</sup> It left Iraq with a reconstruction bill estimated at \$230 billion and \$80 billion in foreign debt.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Iran-Iraq war emphasized Iraq's vulnerability in having only a limited coastline. Iraqi oil exports via the Shatt al-Arab could easily be shut down. Iraq continued to export oil during the war through its pipeline to Turkey, but reliance on a NATO member for an assured avenue of export did not sit well with an Arab leader who needed to demonstrate his ability to act independently within the region.

Saddam feared the crippling economic burden resulting from the Iran-Iraq war ultimately could lead to challenges to his rule. Although there was a surge of Iraqi patriotism and pride at the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the conflict had undermined Saddam's control over the officer corps. In addition, efforts to partially demobilize the army backfired in an economy too weak to absorb the additional manpower.<sup>6</sup>

### Opportunities and Constraints

Faced with post-war economic weakness that had the potential of undoing of his domestic and regional agenda, Saddam sought economic relief. Iraq had pursued some cost-cutting measures, such as the lifting of certain internal price controls, but, to Saddam, the answer to Iraq's economic problems lay in maximizing revenue from raising the price of oil. Kuwait actively stymied this option within OPEC as it pursued a policy of depressing oil prices. Kuwait's oil pricing policies were viewed by the Iraqi leaders as a direct affront and an insult from a government for which he had little regard. Kuwait's actions within OPEC only served to provoke a larger neighbor that happened to be well-armed and hungry for cash.

Kuwait formed the obvious antidote to both Iraq's strategic vulnerability and its economic problems. First, Kuwait became a means of displacing blame for Iraq's economic woes. In pointing to Kuwait's violation of OPEC oil quotas, in reviling Kuwait for its illegal pumping from the shared Rumaila oil field, and by underlining Kuwait's "debt" to Iraq for protecting the region against possible Persian adventurism, Saddam shifted domestic attention from Baghdad to Kuwait as the proximate cause of Iraq's economic problems. Second, Kuwait held the key to Iraq's need to assure independent means of exporting Iraqi oil. Kuwait had a 127-mile coastline and control of islands overlooking access to Iraq's Umm Qasr oil terminal. Iraq had a long-standing claim regarding its rights to Kuwait and Baghdad's desire for assured means of export helped revive those claims.

Saddam saw an opportunity. Kuwait was rich, and despite having some expensive military hardware, was essentially ill-defended. Within the region, only Syria and Iran had any real capability to challenge Iraq, and both of those governments were preoccupied with

their own difficulties. Moreover, Saddam knew well that other Arab states had a fairly uniform disdain for Kuwaitis and Kuwaiti arrogance. Importantly, Saddam doubted Gulf Arabs would enlist non-Arab assistance in resisting any Iraqi action against Kuwait. The actions and rhetoric of other Arab states gave no indication that they would contemplate actions in violation of the Arab Charter that Saddam helped engineer in 1980. In addition, Iraq had just pocketed a non-aggression pact signed with Saudi Arabia in 1989, indicating to Saddam he would have no challenge from that quarter. Kuwait's own gamesmanship in disowning the U.S. ship reflagging operations in 1987 during the Iran-Iraq war probably suggested to Saddam that Kuwait would not call for help until it was too late.

Beyond the region, Saddam saw western governments intent on protecting market share and position in the Gulf. France had been a key weapons supplier during the Iran-Iraq war and remained an important economic partner. Britain had become a major trading partner. The U.S. had tilted toward Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and, although Iran-Contra, human rights issues, terrorism issues and controversy surrounding agriculture credit loans had tested bilateral relations, the Iraqi experience had been that Washington always found a way to temper its criticism of Iraq. Finally, The Soviet Union, although already struggling with the events that would lead to its dissolution, was still viewed by Iraq as a counterweight to those who might protest an Iraqi adventure.

If Saddam saw constraints, he found them at home. To construct a case justifying action against Kuwait, Iraq questioned Kuwait's legitimacy as a state, citing Iraq's historical claim, dating back to Kuwaiti independence, that Kuwait was rightfully an integral part of Iraq. This argumentation was probably deemed necessary to preserve a tortured consistency with the Arab Charter. Saddam's revival of this claim made invasion of the emirate



inevitable, however. One of Saddam's predecessors, Abdul Karim Qassim had tried to assert Iraq's claim following Kuwaiti independence in 1961. British intervention and the Arab league's support for Kuwait against Iraq prevented Qassim from pursuing its claim. "Qassim's failed bid for Kuwait embarrassed and weakened him internally and ultimately led to his overthrow by the Baathists in 1963."<sup>7</sup> Historical comparisons have resonance for Arabs. Saddam, once he raised the issue of Kuwait's legitimacy, invited comparisons with Qassim, thereby probably denying Saddam "less than war" options.

#### Pre-Invasion Objectives. Justifying a Foregone Conclusion. Testing Reactions

Saddam used pre-invasion diplomatic contacts to justify Iraqi complaints and lay out Iraq's economic demands of Kuwait. These contacts were also used to gauge what reaction he could anticipate in support of Kuwait. By focusing primarily on the economic rather than the strategic issues, Saddam lulled Kuwait and others into believing that a compensation package could be devised to placate Saddam. His demands escalated during the January-July 1990 period, however, suggesting that he had already decided on military action and was trying to establish demands that Kuwait could not satisfy.

In February 1990, Iraq conveyed to Kuwait demands that included a moratorium on Kuwait's loans from the Iran-Iraq war period plus an additional \$30 billion in compensation. Iraq also demanded compliance with OPEC quotas, citing Kuwait's violations as actions tantamount to war. Iraq initiation of military maneuvers near the Kuwaiti border at this time could be viewed as a means of testing the reactions of others who Kuwait might call on for support. In the ensuing weeks Saddam added to the demands articulated in February. His foreign minister Tariq Aziz, conveyed to the Arab league that

Iraq wanted the following: an increase of the price of oil to \$25 per barrel, cessation of Kuwaiti oil production from the Rumaila field, a moratorium on wartime loans, and Kuwaiti compensation for Iraqi wartime losses. Had Iraq stopped here with these demands, Saddam may have been able to come away with a compensation package sufficient to address, at least partially, Iraq's economic problems. Instead Iraqi rhetoric escalated. At the Arab summit meeting in May, Saddam described the violation of oil quotas as an act of war against Iraq. Domestically, Saddam's speeches focused on economic issues but, according to Freedman and Karsh, these public statements were "constructed in such a way that any compromise on his part would have been seen as capitulation."<sup>8</sup>

In July 1990, even though Kuwait had agreed to abide by the OPEC quota and was preparing to offer a positive response to some of Iraq's financial demands, Saddam appears to have already made his decision to invade. His rhetoric had already placed him beyond the point of no return. At this point, it is likely that Saddam, concerned more with reaction at home by person or persons unknown who might be ready to pounce on a sign of weakness, was probably already committed to an invasion. By mid-July 35,000 troops were arrayed near the Kuwaiti border. Saddam's July 24 meeting with President Mubarak of Egypt and the July 25 session with U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie very likely served to confirm to Saddam that Iraq could expect no significant opposition.

### Confronting the Unexpected: Where was Plan B?

Saddam's miscalculated in his assessment of the relative risk factors involved in invading Kuwait. Having evaluated his options largely on the basis of regional factors, he assumed that international interest in coming to Kuwait's defense would be low. Essentially,

Saddam underestimated the international political reaction to the prospect of Iraq being in a position to assert control or influence over 40 per cent of the world's oil reserves. For the international community, the Iraqi invasion was viewed not solely as a threat to Kuwait, but as a threat to broader, international interests. A man with limited experience outside of Iraq (his primary non-Iraq experience was a 3 year exile in Cairo in the early 1960's), Saddam's ability to analyze reactions beyond the region was limited. Moreover, even if his world view had been more sophisticated, few leaders could have anticipated the conditions and events that permitted successful agreement on UN-sponsored sanctions and a UN-based international coalition aimed at liberating Kuwait. The coalition and the availability of Saudi Arabia as a base for launching Kuwait's liberation were made possible when Iraq's action seemingly threatened the health of the world economy and the direct interests of multiple states. One of Saddam's errors was his underestimation of how that threat to states beyond the region would inspire them to coalesce into unified action against Iraq.

Saddam's other major error was in not devising a means of obtaining partial victory in his confrontation with Kuwait. Simple blackmail was a possibility here. Saddam could have obtained some economic redress and, in fact, Kuwait was ready to comply with some of Iraq's economic demands. But, by framing Iraqi demands in absolute terms, Saddam allowed himself no option short of total Kuwaiti capitulation. Saddam, of course, wanted more than economic redress, he wanted the Kuwaiti coast as a means of rectifying Iraq's limited access to the Gulf. But in pursuing his objectives without the possibility of compromise, he exposed both his rule and the Iraqi state to inordinate risks when it became clear that an international coalition was prepared to take direct, decisive action against him.

Although an admirer of Joseph Stalin, Saddam failed in following a key methodology of Stalin or any good professional quarterback take what the defense gives you and come back for the remainder another day. Saddam publicly demanded his maximalist option, putting himself in a box where he would lose face, and possibly lose authority at home, if he seemed to back down. He failed to construct his demands of Kuwait in a way that would have allowed Iraq to "win" by obtaining something less than the ideal option of asserting physical control over Kuwait. Would the international community have joined against Iraq for threatening Kuwait and then obtaining compensation for economic injury? I doubt it. Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait offers us a basic lesson: always have a Plan B.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> Phoebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1985), p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), p. 771.

<sup>5</sup> Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order*, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie, *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf*, (New York Times Books, 1990, reprint) p. 198.

<sup>8</sup> Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order*, p. 49.

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